

## **“ETHICS FOR SUSTAINABILITY”**

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I was taken aback when I received a request to write a response to the question:

“What Is The Ethical Foundation For Planning A More Sustainable Future?”

My first reaction was: Does not every one want a future? And doesn't this necessarily mean a commitment to sustainability? Would not everyone earnestly want a more sustainable future?

To have to ask the question at all shows just how far out of balance our crazy, greed-driven culture is. To ask the question is to imply that many people do not want to live on, or, at least, do not want the next generation to live on. It was like being asked: How can one morally justify a flourishing, joyful life for every being on earth?

In a profound sense, there can not and need not be any moral justification for sustainability because sustainability is the foundation for morality, not the other way around.

As the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle cautioned, it show a lack of education to try and prove everything. You can't, for example, prove logic because logic presupposes proof. Likewise, our ultimate norms such as “Love is better than hate” must be gained by intuition; they can't be proved.

No sooner had I received this request than I became ill (no causal connection, I assure you!) and in my fever – induced reveries I penned imaginary responses. I wrote:

“The Ethical Foundation of Sustainability is ‘Joy’ or ‘Life’ or ‘An Ethic of Flourishing’.” ‘Survival’ seemed the most appropriate candidate (especially as the fever escalated), until I settled on Love.

Of course, Love.

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He was huge. He was unbelievably huge. He just kept coming and coming. He was so close.

His blue-grey body turned the intensely deep blue depths into a translucent green, like an enormous halo hovering just below the surface.

I was drawn into his presence like ink into blotting paper.

He blew, rhythmically expelling air. I, too, exhaled and this made me ‘come to’, returning me to my body.

I realized I was wet – by his breath. I had been baptised, the most magnificent baptism one could imagine.

In my baptism, luckily, I was spared being his by a dollop of phelm. It does happen.

His breath smelt...not sweet but not sour – primordial, like the origin of life.

I became aware of someone softly counting the breaths: “17...18...19” it seemed everlasting.

Then after 19 breaths, he dove, not with a rush, just leisurely, almost seamlessly, like the pulse of life itself, hardly a splash.

I hadn't even remembered to be seasick.

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He is one of the largest animals ever to have lived on earth.

His tongue weighs more than an elephant. He measures a length of 26 meters, a weighs of around 160 tonnes.

This is the Pygmy Blue Whale, *Balaenoptera Brevicanada*, hunted close to extinction by the whaling industry, and now, slowly returning from the brink.

Whoever named him 'Pygmy' must have had delusions of grandeur.

We were 30 nautical miles off the west end of Rottnest Island, on board “Whalesong”, a 13 meter catamaran built and sailed by Curt and Mich Jenner who have been researching Whales on the West Australian coast for over 10 years.

We were at 'The Trench', where 'Pygmies' feed. Mich and Curt had spent the summer trying to learn about this Rorqual Whale, before sailing north for the winter to follow Humpbacks on their annual migratory path from their feeding grounds in the southern ocean to their breeding enclaves in the Kimberley.

Very little is known about Pygmy Blues. They are a tropical subspecies of the Blue Whale, but might possibly be a new species altogether. No one knows where they go to mate or to give birth. Very few people have even seen them. Like the Whale Sharks, they are one of the last unfathomable mysteries of the planet.

We stayed with this foundational animal for 2 ½ hours, until the last light. When feeding, Blue Whales have a very regular and predictable blowing and diving pattern: 13 minutes feeding, surfacing for 19 blows, then diving 150 meters again to the krill for 13 minutes.

His blow hole was like the navel of Jupiter, with a large splashguard and a broad, flattened U-shaped head. His eyes were comparatively small and his dorsal fin was comically tiny and stubby, set far back. His tail stock was extremely thick, able to propel him to dizzying depths.

But it was his gargantuan size that impressed. And his dignified, unhurried, magisterial manner. He was the birth of nobility.

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I am content to be recycled and do not long for immortality, as long as life can continue. As we sailed back to the island pushing through the four meter swell, I made a vow to myself: when I am on my death bed, facing my mortality, I will remember the sound of his breathing – the pulse, the push, the power, the promise of life. This is the ethical basis of sustainability.

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There is a saying among the sea gypsies that the last element fish would recognize is water.

The languages of most indigenous peoples do not have a word for “wilderness”. The wild world is home. It is the world, the womb of life.

The very fact that we in the environmental movement are so preoccupied with ‘saving wilderness’ indicates just how diminished our home is and how divorced we have become from the life systems on which we depend.

For late moderns, virtual reality is better known and more trusted than the sensuous and sentient world around us. This is scary. And surely the seductive power of this secondary reality is partly what licences school children to murder their own classmates.

In this one-dimensional world, the fear of snakes, spiders and sharks is reinforced, whole more threatening artefacts – automobiles, drugs, guns – are met with comparatively little alarm. In the same way it is no accident, I feel, that the very fact that we need (and we do!) to develop arguments for sustainability indicates just how desperately non-life affirming our culture has become. Unsustainable habits have transfigured the norm. The compulsion to control, the mania for more, the desire to dominate, the addiction to avarice are common.

Deluded by a “frontier ethics” we are hoodwinked into believing that there are boundless frontiers. We can feel the earth shuddering under the pressures of human malpractices, but we still trust that biotechnology or space science, some theory or invention, will provide the answers to any environmental crisis. We may have been forced to abandon the “myth of superabundance” but this has been replaced by the “myth of scientific supremacy”. This swaggering stance is the exemplar of ecological denial. We can’t even replicate minimal living conditions for a few months, as the prestigious Biosphere II project demonstrated. How can we ‘master’ processes that have 2-3 billion years of research and development behind them? Nature is not only more complex than we know, it is more complex than we can know. We need an ethically responsive, humble science which is self-reflective, non-reductionist and respectful of the intentionality, agency and awesome powers of the ‘more-than-human’ world.

Frontier ethics also sees humans as separate from and superior to ‘earth others’ and regard the non-human realm as a ‘standing reserve’, a resource to be exploited, bereft of any inherent worth of its own. Instead of these cowboy delusions, we need an ethics which recognizes our radical continuity with and dependency on nature. Our relations with earth others are not just instrumental and external, they constitute who we are : Ecological Beings.

We need an ethics of embodiment which articulates humans as ecologically embedded. We need an ethics of care which respects non humans as ethical subjects and fosters inter-species dialogue. We need an ethics of place which does not erase indigenous cultures and awakens us to place attachment as a vital ingredient in a meaningful life. We need an ethics of spiritual practices—or, as I like to call it, spirited practices—which ground us, guide us, limit our created wants and nourish our vital needs.

We need a living earth ethics which throbs with the pungent breath of the whale.

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With the exception of a few saints, we are not pure. I indulge in unsustainable practices. But I still struggle. I still yearn. And I am comforted by the Taoist aphorism: “water that is too pure contains no fish”